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Physical Characteristics of Resting Places for the Homeless in Johor Bahru City Centre

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Abstract

The urban development and rising cost of living in Johor Bahru had reduced some people to live without any proper homes. The paper discusses the causes of the problem and the physical characteristics of their resting places. It was based on research that was conducted using three methods, namely literature review, unstructured interview and site observation. The findings suggest that the majority of the homeless were local people who tried to find jobs and were choosy in the choice of resting places. The finding of the research could be used as guiding tools in designing a one-stop centre for them.

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Keywords: Physical characteristics; space criteria; resting place; homeless

1. Introduction

Johor Bahru City Centre is an area of high commercial value that attracts both local and foreign entrepreneurs. It is also a border city that separates Singapore and West Malaysia. The urban development and rising cost of living in

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the city lead to some side effects. Among others, it reduced some people to live in the city centre, without any proper homes. These people are the homeless or bummers that in one way or the other could tarnish the image of the city. The other concern is regarding the safety of the city folks. The homeless were also mentioned to have caused some crimes in the city centre. Some studies on this group of people may highlight some of their problems and their needs. One way or the other, this effort may reduce problems associated with the homeless.

The paper discusses the causes of the problem in being homeless and the physical characteristics of their resting places. It was based on research that was conducted to identify the reasons for their being homeless and the physical criteria of the resting places chosen by them. Thus, there were two primary questions to be asked. The first question was why they were homeless in the first place. The second question was what were the physical characteristics associated with the places that they chose to spend their resting time in Johor Bahru city centre.

The primary intention was to understand their situation and their choice of spaces. The findings of the data could be used in designing a temporary shelter for the homeless. Even though there is a shelter provided for them in the city, it did not seem sufficient. The reason was that there were still a large number of homeless on the street daily. The intention of doing a shelter that relate well to their needs, hopefully, can somehow reduce the number of homeless people in the street. The research was intended to assist the effort to clean the streets of Johor Bahru city centre. Firstly, the reasons for the people to be homeless were seek for and secondly, the hope of eliminating or reducing the number of this group of people without proper homes. The knowledge of what causes them and their requirements can also help to improve the looks of the homeless. The image of the city among the locals and the visitors can be improved when there is a reduction in the number of people loitering around without any proper homes. The image can be better when there is an improvement in health and the outlook of the group.

2. Literature review

Azhan et.al. (2012) note that the provision of urban housing for the low-income group has become vitally important as urbanization expands. This situation was partly due to the increase in rural-urban migration and cost of living enlarges the proportion of urban poor as noted by Agus (In Azhan et. al.) In the past, the urban form of housing was provided by the old shop houses. However, as noted by Wan Hashimah (2013), many of the upper floors of the shop houses were already converted to storage area rather than accommodation spaces. Walk-up flats were then introduced and became common on the fringes of major cities in Malaysia due the increase in demand of urban dwellers. The popularity was due to the relatively high density and lower construction, land and maintenance cost. The rental of the walk-up flats, however, was still considerably expensive for the poorly earned urban dwellers. Subsequently, some of the urban dwellers became homeless. Thus, homeless can relate partly to the lack of affordable accommodation within the city centre.

According to scholars, both the physical qualities and the human aspects can affect the livelihood of an urban area. The physical quality of an urban area relates to its general appearance as well as the activities around it. Jacobs (1999) notes that the physical quality that is required to make a great street is known as 'liveability' and it affect the use of the streets. It was noted by Rahman (2013, in Rahmana et al, 2015) that there were not many examples of street environments that are friendly and can accommodate all users in Malaysia. Rahmana et al. (2015) notes that pleasant environment is one of the sub-factors that can attract activities onto the street. It is also one of the criteria that support livelihood. Apart from the physical qualities, the activities of the people can also affect the liveability on the street of an urban area (Appleyard, 1981; Wan Ismail, 2010). In other words, the human aspects also play a major role in providing a good urban space.

Wakhidah (2012) suggests that a good public space in urban areas need to accommodate for everyone, including the marginal, the forgotten and undesirable people. The group includes street vendors, street people, those with different ability and other marginalized community. It was considered as one of the problems concerning social issues that are clearly unresolved in the master plan of the city. The accommodating public space will be created when the physical aspects of space can accommodate the needs of the forgotten community. The society will be educated to learn and share, to respect the right of the other users in the city. Consequently, the physical quality of the visual city will be better since there are no annexation of space and overlapping activities.

It was noted by Rahmana et al. (2015) that an understanding of the people's need in urban space development in the city is required. Lack of understanding of the need may result in a reduction of public spaces and urban spaces

not being friendly to their users. There are many causes that may reduce the liveability of the streets. One of the causes of a decline in the physical quality of an urban area is the presence of the homeless. The reason is because some of them look dirty and haggard.

Link et al. (1994) define homeless as 'sleeping in shelters, abandoned building, bus station, etc. United Nation, on the other hand, considers two definitions of homeless, as either absolute homeless or relative homeless. Absolute homeless refers to individuals living in the streets without any physical shelter of their own, including those who spend their nights in emergency shelters (Layton, 2000). This definition is in line with Burt and Cohen (1989) who define homeless individuals simply as those people without any shelter at night. Layton (2000) also describes relatively homeless as those who live in spaces that do not meet basic health and safety standards.

According to De Rosa et al. (1999), the homeless could be those who came from the village and migrated to cities to try their luck. However, they do not have a good education, adequate financial capital, knowledge, and many others. Thus, they were not able to compete with the other prospective workers. The other reason for being homeless is due to the distress and life in the city that forced some individuals to live without a home. On the whole, they were not able to have a place of residence, employment and financial resources. The homeless are thus the people who live in places and not considered to be decent by the ordinary local community. The homeless people could be different from beggars. They do not have a proper place to live and but may have some work. On the contrary, beggars are people who earn a living by begging in public in various ways and reasons to expect mercy from others.

The discussion above relates to the earlier notes by Barnard (1938). He notes that the homeless problem arises because of the effects of the capitalist system. The capitalists, in his opinion, seek to maximize profits for themselves alone. This action reduced many people to be exploited and left behind. Mitchell (2003) also relates to the high cost of living, unemployment, housing and health facilities that give pressure to the society and reduce some of them to become homeless.

Ferguson, Bender and Thompson (2015) examine coping strategies among different genders of the homeless. The homeless young adults stressed that they relate to legal (e.g., full-time employment, selling personal possessions, selling blood/plasma) and illegal economic activity (e.g., selling drugs, theft and prostitution). It was suggested that understanding gender differences in coping strategies and economic activity might help customize interventions aimed at safe and legal income generation for this population.

Nowadays, many people try to help the homeless by offering shelter, food, clothing and so on. These efforts were recognised as means to minimise their problems. Blast Shelter, for instance, was built for those who need temporary shelter (O'Toole, T.P., Gibbon, J.L., Hanusa, & B. H & Fin, M. J, 1999). In Malaysia, there is a place called Stop Porch that is a project by the National Welfare Foundation. The first Blast Shelter is in Kuala Lumpur and then followed by Johor Bahru, Sarawak and Penang. Apart from giving shelter for the homeless, Blast Shelter also help the homeless to get jobs according to their qualifications and skills. Many homeless people had successfully changed their lives with the help of stop porch (Snow, D., & Anderson, L., 1993).

Apart from the shelter, there was also a concern in helping the homeless in providing food. These charitable services make a substantial contribution to the food and nutrient intake of these vulnerable people. As highlighted by Pelham-Burn et al. (2014), these services meant to improve their diet. The kind of food provision is thus an important aspect to consider. The aspects that need to be taken into consideration include the quantity and the composition of the provision. The other considerations are the composition of menus and the acceptance of the food among these people.

The other option in helping the homeless is the use of short-term rental subsidy vouchers, as noted by Meschede and Chaganti (2015). These vouchers offer a new approach to addressing the housing needs of families facing homelessness. The effort was practiced in Massachusetts, USA, whereby the homeless families were provided houses rather than shelter. The homeless were given two years of rental subsidy plus support services to enable them to maintain market rate housing. The finding of the research done by Meschede and Chaganti (2015) showed that only one-quarter of the homeless families was able to retain their houses at a market rate. It was suggested that supportive services need to be integrated at the end of the short-term rental subsidy. This integration will help more homeless families to retain the houses.

3. Methodology

The research was conducted using three methods, namely literature review, unstructured interviews and observation. The literature review was based on the written documents by scholars and the local city council on the homeless. The information was gathered from reports, newspapers, internet, maps and documents by the local authority. The related resources by the local authority were guidelines, local agenda, policies, strategic plans, implementation procedures and current practices.

The observation was carried out on three basic time frames, namely in the morning, afternoon and at night. The intention was to check on the location of the homeless in the urban areas at a different time of the day. The observation method was employed to establish the physical environment chosen by the homeless in Johor Bahru city centre. The aspects that were noted in the observation were the physical places where the homeless chose and the associated activities that they did in that place. The observation was made to help in identifying various characteristics or pattern of the homeless. This method was carried out at the initial stage of the research. However, the results obtained were unsatisfactory. The time for observation was then concentrated to between 10:00 pm until 5:00 am. The time frame coincided with the time when the homeless rested.

The secondary data was obtained using an unstructured interview conducted with the stakeholders and the homeless. It was conducted as a mean to obtain immediate respond from the stakeholders and the homeless. The stakeholders chosen were from the local authority and Jabatan Kebajikan Masyarakat (JKM), an agency under the local authority dealing with the welfare of the homeless. The information from this agency was specific and detailed in terms of the implementation and the guidelines of development since it involved directly with the homeless. Some of the homeless were chosen at random to be interviewed, regardless of their age or gender. They were carefully chosen since some of them were not approachable. Some of them were rather aggressive. An analysis was done after all the data were collected from the three methods. Only then, the conclusions were drawn.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Profile and reasons

The interview with the local authority (2014) revealed that the largest components of the homeless were either the beggars (40%) or those who worked in Singapore (40%) (Table 1). The finding closely relates to what was noted by De Rosa et al. (1999).

Table 1. Profile of The Homeless in Johor Bahru

Number	Lifestyle	Gender	Age	Percentage
1	Beggar			40
2	Working in Singapore	Male and female	40 to 60 years old	40
3	Get charity			15
4	Others			5

(Source: Local Authority, 2014)

The profile of the homeless (Table 1) closely relates to the finding from the interview of the homeless in Johor Bahru City Centre (Table 2). More than half (53%) of the homeless related to not getting a job as the main reason for being homeless. Most of them were from outside Johor, such as from Sabah, Sarawak and other states in Malaysia. The main reason for going to Johor was seeking for jobs, and they failed to get employed due to the high competition. According to the local authority (2014) the number of individuals who apply for jobs exceeds the

existing supply by the government or private organizations. Begging seems to be an easy way to get money to feed themselves.

The table also shows that a large number (40%) of the homeless actually had worked across the border (Table 1). This means that they would go to work in Singapore and come back to Malaysia to rest. As mentioned in the methodology, the time for observation was concentrated to between 10:00 pm until 5:00 am when the homeless rested. This period coincided with their present in the town centre. Some of the reasons for not having proper homes include not having enough money to pay the rent or to buy a house (Table 2). By being homeless, they freed themselves from having to pay rent or quit-rent, water bill, and so on for their stay.

The other reason is the consideration that it was a waste of money to use it for renting since they just need a few hours for resting before making a move to Singapore for work. Many Malaysians like to work in Singapore due to the higher income (Table 2). The weakening ringgit and high cost of living in Johor Bahru had made the option more attractive to work in Singapore. As mentioned by Johor South SME Association Founding president, Teh Kee Sin (The Star, 14 July 2015), the locals were already working in the Republic since the 1980s. The income of the workers were already tripled compared to what they could earn locally. In the last quarter of 2014, S\$1 traded at between RM2.60 and RM2.63. In the first quarter of 2015, the ringgit weakened to RM2.72 and RM2.75. The weakening of ringgit means an increase in the earning of the Malaysians who worked in the Republic. An accountant in Malaysia for instance may earn around RM6,000 in Malaysia. In the Republic he can earn around S\$8,000 (RM22,400). A servicing staff at a coffee outlet can earn about RM1,300 locally but can earn around S\$1,600 to S\$1,900 in the Republic. The vast difference in earning encourages the locals to commute daily to work.

It should be noted that a common problem faced by those who commute daily from Johor Bahru to Singapore is the heavy traffic. It is common for them to spend about 2 to 3 hours on the road twice daily. A general solution is to start travelling as early as 5:00 o'clock in the morning if the working hour starts at 8:00 am. Thus, The resting hour in between work is shorter compared to those who work locally. The profile of the homeless also showed that the homeless were the older adults (Table 1) who presumably need rest rather than spending their time on the entertainment at night.

Table 2. Reasons for being homeless

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Employers in Singapore	12	24
Distance of residence and work too far	8	16
Working time constraints (shift)	12	24
High cost of living	5	10
Just arrive from other states	3	6
Requires only a brief recess	5	10
Availability of resting places	5	10
TOTAL	50	100

(Source: Open Interview, 2014)

The other reason for choosing to be homeless was the availability of resting places for them in the city centre. The local authority had upgraded the city to include places where the pedestrians can take a break. However, the homeless consider the street furniture such as seats as possible resting places for them (10%).

4.2. Resting places of the homeless

It was found that the homeless chose various places as their resting places (Table 3). Most of them chose secluded and quiet places for resting. Only about a quarter of them (24%) were bothered to have a raised place in the form of chairs as their resting places. The others found it comfortable enough just to place papers or cardboard over the cold floors as their resting places.

Half of the homeless preferred to rest in places that were partially enclosed by walls (Table 3). The places include building corners, hallways, below the stairs, abandon stores. The other half of the homeless chose to rest in an open area, such as along the corridor and on public chairs. The finding suggests that both kinds of spaces were equally preferable. The main concern was to be safe from the intrusion of the public. What they needed was a place to relax and sleep while waiting for the next day to start their daily routine. All their choices except for the chairs had roofs above. The choice shows their concern about the weather where rainfall is rather frequent.

The favourite places for the homeless to rest were at Plaza Seni, shop lot and along the alleys (Figure 1). Plaza Seni was an area for the artists and surrounded by the old shop houses. At this area, there were chairs in front of a row of shop houses. These chairs were chosen as sleeping places by the homeless. The other favourite place was the corridor of the shops along Segget Street. The area was chosen since it gave a wide enough space and also sheltered from the weather.



Fig. 1. Selection of the Homeless in the Area Around The City Of Johor Bahru; Plaza Seni, 2. Shop lot, 3. Alley 4. AIA building

The number of the homeless at the resting places increases over the night (Table 3). This situation suggests that most of them walked around the city until midnight. The time relates to the activities around the city centre. Many of the shops especially the restaurants open until midnight. Thus, there were usually many people walking around the city until midnight. The choices of resting places by the homeless were placed where the public like to move around. The choice means that the homeless had to wait for the shops and restaurants to close before they rested. The places were empty after midnight and became the home of the homeless.

Table 3. Resting places of the homeless

Resting Places	Time			%
	10-12pm	12-2am	2-5am	

Building corners	3	5	7	14
Open corridor	1	2	12	24
Hallways	2	5	8	16
Below the stairs	4	6	5	10
Public chairs	0	3	12	24
Abandon stores	5	5	5	10
Total	15	26	50	100

5. Conclusions and recommendation

It was mentioned earlier that the activities of the people can affect the livelihood on the street of an urban area. The presence of the homeless could somehow affect the quality of the street. The issue of the homeless in urban areas, particularly in Johor Bahru could perhaps be reduced by identifying the cause of problems. An understanding of their problems and preferences can help to suggest ways to improve their conditions.

Despite their condition, the findings suggest that the homeless were choosy in the choice of spaces for their resting places. Their preferences of the physical characteristics of their resting places could be used as guiding tools in designing a one-stop centre for them. In one way or the other, the building of a proper place can help to clean up Johor Bahru city centre from the ugly sighting of the homeless sleeping all over the place within the urban areas. The physical quality or the livelihood of the urban area can be improved once there is some help to improve the well-being of the homeless. The general public may also feel more comfortable and safe to be around them. On the whole, the improvements on the homeless can help to make the urban area more liveable and friendly to the users.

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